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1961/02/18

(50) Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to the President Kennedy

(19) Washington, February 18, 1961.

- (11) Here, in sharp form, are the issues on Cuba. Bissell and Mann are the real antagonists at the staff level. Since I think you lean to Mann's view, I have put Bissell on top.
- (11) On balance I think the gloomier parts of both papers are right. Diplomatic and public opinion are surely not ready for an invasion, but Castro's internal strength continues to grow. The battalion's dispersal would be a blow to U.S. prestige, but we should today have a hard time at the U.N. if it goes in.
- (11) The one hope I see is in an early ¹/_m even if thin ¹/_m recognition of a rival regime. I think if a Government-in-Exile can be surfaced promptly we could and should follow Mann's suggestion of working toward its recognition fairly soon. (We could also put in a full trade embargo against Castro, and you could sorrowfully read him out of the liberal family in a strong and factual speech about his outrages.) Then, conceivably, we could hold back Bissell's battalion for about three months and even build it up somewhat. And when it did go in, the color of civil war would be quite a lot stronger.

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C O P Y

17 February 1961

CUBA

1. BACKGROUND: About a year ago the Agency was directed to set in motion the organization of a broadly based opposition to the Castro regime and the development of propaganda channels, clandestine agent nets within Cuba, and trained paramilitary ground and air forces wherewith that opposition could overthrow the Cuban regime. The concept was that this should be so far as possible a Cuban operation, though it was well understood that support in many forms would have to come from the United States. Great progress has been made in this undertaking. A Government-in-Exile will soon be formed embracing most reputable opposition elements. It will have a left-of-center political orientation and should command the support of liberals both within Cuba and throughout the hemisphere. It will sponsor and increasingly control trained and combat-ready military forces based in Central America. A decision must soon be made as to the support (if any) the United States will render the opposition henceforth.

2. PROSPECTS FOR THE CASTRO REGIME: The Castro regime is steadily consolidating its control over Cuba. Assuming that the United States applies political and economic pressures at roughly present levels of severity, it will continue to do so

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regardless of declining popular support. There is no significant likelihood that the Castro regime will fall of its own weight.

a. The regime is proceeding methodically to solidify its control over all the major institutions of the society and to employ them on the Communist pattern as instruments of repression. The Government now directly controls all radio, television, and the press. It has placed politically dependable leadership in labor unions, student groups, and professional organizations. It has nationalized most productive and financial enterprises and is using a program of so-called land reform to exercise effective control over the peasantry. It has destroyed all political parties except the Communist party. Politically reliable and increasingly effective internal security and military forces are being built up.

b. Cuba is in economic difficulties but the Communist Bloc will almost certainly take whatever steps are necessary to forestall any decisive intensification of these troubles. Economic dislocations will occur but will not lead to the collapse or the significant weakening of the Castro regime.

c. At the present time the regular Cuban military establishment, especially the Navy and Air Force, are of

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extremely low effectiveness. Within the next few months, however, it is expected that Cuba will begin to take delivery of jet aircraft and will begin to have available trained Cuban pilots of known political reliability. During the same period the effectiveness of ground forces will be increasing and their knowledge of newly acquired Soviet weapons will improve. Therefore, after some date probably no more than six months away it will become militarily infeasible to overthrow the Castro regime except through the commitment to combat of a sizeable organized military force. The option of action by the Cuban opposition will no longer be open.

3. THE NATURE OF THE THREAT: Cuba will, of course, never present a direct military threat to the United States and it is unlikely that Cuba would attempt open invasion of any other Latin American country since the U. S. could and almost certainly would enter the conflict on the side of the invaded country. Nevertheless, as Castro further stabilizes his regime, obtains more sophisticated weapons, and further trains the militia, Cuba will provide an effective and solidly defended base for Soviet operations and expansion of influence in the Western Hemisphere. Arms, money, organizational and other support can be provided from Cuba to dissident leaders and groups throughout Latin America in order to create political instability, encourage Communism, weaken the

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prestige of the U. S., and foster the inevitable popular support that Castro's continuance of power will engender. A National Estimate states: "For the Communist powers, Cuba represents an opportunity of incalculable value. More importantly, the advent of Castro has provided the Communists with a friendly base for propaganda and agitation throughout the rest of Latin America and with a highly exploitable example of revolutionary achievement and successful defiance of the United States."

4. POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION: For reasons which require no elaboration the overt use of U. S. military forces to mount an invasion of Cuba has been excluded as a practical alternative. Broadly defined the following three possible alternative courses of action remain for consideration:

a. Intensification of economic and political pressures coupled with continued covert support of sabotage and minor guerrilla actions but excluding substantial commitment of the Cuban opposition's paramilitary force.

b. Employment of the paramilitary force but in a manner which would not have the appearance of an invasion of Cuba from the outside.

c. Commitment of the paramilitary force in a surprise landing, the installation under its protection on Cuban soil of the opposition government and either the rapid spread of

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the revolt or the continuation of large scale guerrilla action in terrain suited for that purpose.

These alternatives are discussed in the following paragraphs.

5. DIPLOMATIC AND ECONOMIC PRESSURE: There is little that can be done to impose real political and economic pressure on the Castro regime and no such course of action now under serious consideration seems likely to bring about its overthrow.

a. A true blockade of Cuba enforced by the United States would involve technical acts of war and has now been dismissed as infeasible.

b. Action to halt arms shipments from Cuba into any other part of the hemisphere would be cumbersome and easily evaded if air transport were employed. While undoubtedly of some value it is difficult to see that the institution of such measures would either impose severe pressure on the Castro regime or effectively insulate the rest of the hemisphere from it. Castro's principal tools of subversion are people, ideology, the force of example and money. The flow of these items cannot be dammed up.

c. Further economic sanctions are theoretically possible but can quite readily be offset by an increase of trade with the Bloc.

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d. In any event, it is estimated that the prospects for effective international action are poor.

6. THE MIDDLE COURSE: Careful study has been given to the possibility of infiltrating the paramilitary force gradually to an assembly point in suitable terrain, hopefully avoiding major encounters in the process and committing it to extensive guerrilla action. This course of action would have the advantage of rendering unnecessary a single major landing which could be described as an invasion. The infiltration phase would take on the coloration of efforts by small groups of Cubans to join an already existing resistance movement. Unfortunately, it has been found to be infeasible on military grounds. Basically the reasons (explained more fully in the attachment) are:

a. It is considered militarily infeasible to infiltrate in small units a force of this size to a single area where it could assemble, receive supplies, and engage in coordinated military action. Such an operation would have to be done over a period of time and the loss of the element of surprise after initial infiltrations would permit government forces to frustrate further reinforcements to the same area.

b. Military units significantly smaller than the battalion presently undergoing unit training would fall short of the "minimum critical mass" required to give any significant likelihood of success. Smaller scale infiltrations would not

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produce a psychological effect sufficient to precipitate general uprisings of wide-spread revolt among disaffected elements of Castro's armed forces.

c. Actually, the least costly and most efficient way to infiltrate the force into a terrain suitable for protracted and powerful guerrilla operations would be by a single landing of the whole force as currently planned and its retirement from the landing point into the chosen redoubt.

7. A LANDING IN FORCE: The Joint Chiefs of Staff have evaluated the military aspects of the plan for a landing by the Cuban opposition. They have concluded that "this plan has a fair chance of ultimate success" (that is of detonating a major and ultimately successful revolt against Castro) and that, if ultimate success is not achieved there is every likelihood that the landing can be the means of establishing in favorable terrain a powerful guerrilla force which could be sustained almost indefinitely. The latter outcome would not be (and need not appear as) a serious defeat. It would be the means of exerting continuing pressure on the regime and would be a continuing demonstration of inability of the regime to establish order. It could create an opportunity for an OAS intervention to impose a cease-fire and hold elections.

a. Any evaluation of the chances of success of the assault force should be realistic about the fighting qualities

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of the militia. No definitive conclusions can be advanced but it must be remembered that the majority of the militia are not fighters by instinct or background and are not militiamen by their own choice. Their training has been slight and they have never been exposed to actual fire (particularly any heavy fire power) nor to air attack.

Moreover, the instabilities within Cuba are such that if the tide shifts against the regime, the chances are strong that substantial numbers will desert or change sides.

b. There is no doubt that the paramilitary force would be widely assumed to be U. S. supported. Nevertheless, this conclusion would be difficult to prove and the scale of its activity would not be inconsistent with the potentialities for support by private Cuban and American groups rather than by the U. S. Government. It must be emphasized, moreover, that this enterprise would have nothing in common (as would the use of U. S. military forces) with the Russian suppression of Hungary or the Chinese suppression of the Tibetans. This would be a force of dissident Cubans with Cuban political and military leadership.

c. There would be adverse political repercussions to a landing in force but it is not clear how serious these would be. Most Latin American Governments would at least privately

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approve of unobtrusive U. S. support for such an opposition move, especially if the political coloration of the opposition were left-of-center. The reaction of the rest of the free world, it is estimated, would be minimal in the case of unobtrusive U. S. support for such an attempt. It might produce a good deal of cynicism throughout the world about the U. S. role but if quickly successful little lasting reaction. Generally speaking it is believed that the political cost would be low in the event of a fairly quick success. The political dangers flowing from long continued large scale guerrilla warfare would be greater but there are diplomatic preparations that could be made to forestall extreme adverse reactions in this contingency.

8. DISSOLUTION OF THE MILITARY FORCE: A decision not to use the paramilitary force must consider the problem of dissolution, since its dissolution will surely be the only alternative if it is not used within the next four to six weeks. It is hoped that at least one hundred volunteers could be retained for infiltration in small teams but it is doubtful whether more than this number would be available or useful for this type of activity.

a. There is no doubt that dissolution in and of itself will be a blow to U. S. prestige as it will be interpreted in many Latin American countries and elsewhere as evidence of

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the U. S. inability to take decisive action with regard to Castro. David will again have defeated Goliath. Anti-U. S. regimes like that of Trujillo would gain strength while pro-U. S. Betancourt would undoubtedly suffer. Surely Ydigoras, who has been an exceedingly strong ally, would also be placed in a very difficult position for his support of a disbanded effort. It must be remembered in this connection that there are sectors of Latin American opinion which criticize the U. S. for not dealing sufficiently forcefully with the Castro regime. In fact, one reason why many Latin American governments are holding back in opposing Castro is because they feel that sooner or later the U. S. will be compelled to take strong measures.

b. The resettlement of the military force will unavoidably cause practical problems. Its members will be angry, disillusioned and aggressive with the inevitable result that they will provide honey for the press bees and the U. S. will have to face the resulting indignities and embarrassments. Perhaps more important, however, will be the loss of good relations with the opposition Cuban leaders. To date almost all non-Batista, non-Communist political leaders have been encouraged or offered help in fighting Castro. An abandonment of the military force will be considered by them as a

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withdrawal of all practical support. In view of the breadth of the political spectrum involved, this will cause some difficulties for the future since it is hard to imagine any acceptable post-Castro leadership that will not include some of the exiles dealt with during the past year.

9. CONCLUSIONS:

a. Castro's position is daily getting stronger and will soon be consolidated to the point that his overthrow will only be possible by drastic, politically undesirable actions such as an all-out embargo or an overt use of military force.

b. A failure to remove Castro by external action will lead in the near future to the elimination of all internal and external Cuban opposition of any effective nature. Moreover, the continuance of the Castro regime will be a substantial victory for the Sino-Soviet Bloc which will use Cuba as a base for increased activity throughout the Western Hemisphere, thereby accentuating political instability and weakening U. S. prestige and influence.

c. The Cuban paramilitary force, if used, has a good chance of overthrowing Castro or at the very least causing a damaging civil war without requiring the U. S. to commit itself to overt action against Cuba. Whatever embarrassment the alleged (though deniable) U. S. support may cause, it

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may well be considerably less than that resulting from the continuation of the Castro regime or from the more drastic and more attributable actions necessary to accomplish the result at a later date.

d. Even though the best estimate of likely Soviet reaction to a successful movement against Castro indicates problems to the U. S. arising from the removal or substantial weakening of the Castro regime, Soviet propaganda and political moves will still be much less prejudicial to the long-range interests of the U. S. than would the results of a failure to remove Castro.

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